

THE EVOLUTION OF THE BAZAAR

by

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Warming up your side

The storm begins late
as I lie awake
warming up your side
as I do those nights when you
come to bed late. Unbalanced,
awkward, like an exhausted runner on the turn,
I lie awake, listening to the rain,
to the hollowness of everything.
I know I will not sleep tonight
without the seduction of slow
breath and urgent murmur, know
this night I could slip self-indulgent
into a sticky, cryptic poem,
but lie awake, listening.

From the porch now I watch
the rain and Earth collide--
each drop exploding in the drive,
each fragrant vanishing as though
it had somewhere to go.
When the rain stops and the moon, newly risen,
haloes our car, spooning out light to each

desperate drop sliding over the hood; when leaves
lifted by the storm sift, shining black, through the new grass,
and I see the last swell of the storm
drift madly over the horizon,
into another neighborhood, I know again,
I could slip into that poem--
a poem of chaos and entropy
and of the anarchy of clouds,
of shivering at night in the lukewarm rain--a poem
like this one.

Gravity Jones

When my family moved to town a welcoming committee

hummed with news and advice in the front yard.

It's a peaceful town, they said, and pay no attention to Gravity Jones.

He's noisy but harmless.

Got shot down in the war and his mind didn't survive the fall.

But the town kids paid attention.

We'd watch him babble through the cemetery,

a drunken firefly flitting between tombstones,

on his way to the cliff of Indian Hill.

There he'd stand and heave stones over the highway,

that curved, with the river, gently,

like the lip of a rabid dog, toward town.

"That one's in the river," he'd say,

then as the stone careened like a lost meteor

through the willows, a hundred yards short of the river,

he'd shout "Fuck gravity!"

and pick up another.

Sometimes we'd follow him to a bridge,

and watch as he teetered on the rail, lamenting to the fish.

When the football bus stopped for the ambulance

beneath Indian Hill

we all knew it was Gravity.

Forty armored souls waned at the windows
as the troopers loaded him on the stretcher.
Bleary-eyed and broken like a gigged carp,
he was laid uncovered into the ambulance.

Weekends we go to The Hill and lie on the cliff,
dangling our feet over the edge, drinking, talking,
watching cars curve toward town.
Then we stand and heave our beer cans over the edge.
"Fuck gravity!" we cheer.

When the Bag Burst

Remember the night we swam
skinny in the sheriff's pool,
bobbing cautiously like wary jellyfish
in the dark corner.

And I was drunk and worried because
I could only float face down, feet sunken,
and you turned me over and said "Breathe,"
and I did, but was wary of the water
belting at my ears.

Remember squirming home through the alley,
squealing as the gravel tore at our soggy soles,
then pulling each other to the ground
that swayed with the stillness of the dream.

Remember our throats aching
and desperate, fearless whispers rushing.

Remember sprawling close
in the lawn, gazing,
and the universe, its incredible gravity sucking us
toward its center so fast, that
we fainted
only to wake in the morning
drenched with the dew

that bled between us then
sucked into the Earth.
Remember the roar of remorse
when the garbage truck pulled to the curb,
and we lay naked and awkward
as the garbage men loaded;
and when the bag burst
the garbage man, unconcerned
bare-handed the rubbish into the grinder
and we sank quietly into the house
pinching our noses.

Annulment

One languid night
when the rain slurred pale notes
on an overturned bucket
outside my door,
I sat quietly in the living room
feeling only the low hum
of several drinks.
The ice in my glass settled
beneath the buzz
of my aquarium's florescent light
--a timid blue spotlight on my only pet - Stud Guppy.
This night Stud had forsaken his seaweed circuit
to float like a disjointed bone,
his dorsal relaxed, so that,
his shadow on the wall behind was
a distorted ellipse.
And when he gaped at me
with slow lonely blinks, as though,
he had crossed the universe
to orbit a frozen planet
it occurred to me that he,
being a lover by design,

might be in need of a mate.

I slid into the pet shop
and found a girl I'd met -- somewhere.
Locked tight in her sweater,
behind the counter
she seemed sympathetic to my wetness
and to my quest for that certain guppy.
She stood quietly on a stool behind the tank.
Her skirt tickling the glass,
she fondled the net with slow patience
while I searched.

Then I saw her, an elegant line
gliding like an eagle on an updraft in a patch of plastic seaweed,
between a ceramic mansion
and a bronze frogman,
and I pointed.

The swath of the net
was an effortless lilt
like the reflex of a tickled thigh.
Out of the tank she seemed much smaller.
My blood slowed as her fleshy gills trembled,

and I imagined her on the way home,
drooping in a ziplocked baggie
in the rain,
and later, perhaps knowing
her offspring might spin like lazy electrons
down the stool.

I reached over and turned the girl's hand, gently,
and Stud's annulled bride
dropped silently into the tank.
And as I looked up, letting go,
she shook the net dry
and turned away.

Fixing Me

I want to tell you
as I stand here soaked,
the world outside tickled and torn,
how last night I sat
on the couch, inert, watching television
with you sleeping beside me, harbored safe.
How when the weather reports interrupted, with maps,
to preach of a storm of biblical proportion
and I saw the clouds moving across the world
I wanted to wake you, but
slipped silently from your grasp
to the garage,
loaded my john-boat into the truck
and sailed the westward hour
to Freeman's Lake.

I arrived at dawn -- a witness to the exodus of weekend campers
migrating like geese to a safer climate.
Like a salmon swimming seaward to spawn
I perted their "V".
Ignoring their horns and shouts of "Go home, fool!"
I took the access road

to the ledge of Lone Oak cove
and pushed it over--
the impact of its bow like the slap of so many volts
into a refracted brain.
And when I dropped into the mud and waded to the boat,
the water seemed indifferent.
Only the waves wanted to hold me to shore
as I loaded the oars and pulled hard through the trees, rowing
until my arms were as tight as jack-springs,
toward the center of the cove,
where I tied-off on the oak sentinel
and sat peering into the water,
past my distorted reflection
to see an immense bass shatter a crowd of minnows
then roll by my boat,
fixing me in his eye.

I want to tell you
how I ignored the warden's bullhorn
and the crowd gathering in the picnic shelter,
turned my bow away from shore
and watched the bruised and swollen sky
come so fast

that it was like feeling the Earth spin, and
about the wind and the rain
and the lightning that I waited for,
wondering if I had anything it needed, then
feeling the salute of hair
before the oak exploded
with a bullet report crack of limbs that fell
like petrified shrapnel
into the sleepwalking water,
and about the warden holding his hand
on his pistol while his deputy
untied me from the smoldering tree,
hooked me to their stern,
dragged me to shore, and
loaded my boat.
And how when the warden,
screaming of my lunacy,
scattered the crowd, its fragments
darted by like groping fish
in a buried cave, staring,
at a distance, shielded by the rain
as from a dangerous isotope
at critical mass.
And that a woman stepped from beneath the shelter

to tell me that the lightning
had been God reminding me
how sinfully frail I am,
and that I told her
he missed.

I want to tell you
that the deputy followed me out of the park
and that the rain stopped
at the edge of town, but now,
can you understand why,
as I stand here
with my muddy jeans in my hand,
seeing your eyes,
placid like a sleepy mountain lake,
still squinty with the morning,
so beautiful and so vulnerable,
I kiss you, and say nothing.

Homecoming

With the perfect pendulum swing
of a hungry punter,
and with his mottled neck standing out
in angry wires, Coach
laid his sneakered foot full bore
into the crack of Victor Burgess' ass
just as the ball was snapped.
"Demnit Victor, Commit!

Move off the ball."

Victor ejaculated something about his balls,
though the message was mangled
by his mouthpiece and his pain,
and got to sprint the sidelines chanting
"My body for the team."

And that was how homecoming week began
there on that muddy practice field,
surrounded by the silent, dried tendrils
of the summer crops,
where we fought daily until dusk, trading jerseys,
taking turns being enemies
and heroes.

(Stanza break)

As the week went on the whole school
sank into one mind, steeped
in patriotic fervor and fueled
by rumors of our rival Beaverville Bobcats
marauding long past midnight
in our town
and of cat-nappings and sabotage
in Beaverville.

On Tuesday morning an outhouse appeared
on the lawn of the school,
a seared cat head nailed to its door,
and Matt Meese, our fullback,
who had dubbed himself the Crazy Stud,
was called to the office.

Wednesday the school assembled for spirit.
Coach spoke about sportsmanship
then sang the fight song with the cheerleaders while
we voted for the queen.
Afterward, at practice,
he was infused with enthusiasm, so much so that when
the Crazy Stud, flipping out his mouthpiece in the huddle,
hung a long string of spit from the bridge
of Coach's nose,

Coach only laughed and wiped his nose slowly
with his sleeve.

Thursday Coach brought the local Trooper
into Driver's Ed
for a film on seatbelt safety
and sat scribbling in the corner while the Trooper
showed us the fate
of imprudent manequins, endless collisions,
piles of shredded flesh and tin
and bloody, empty faces until Glenda Camden faked a faint
and he stopped the film saying
"Remember, I never unbuckled a dead man,"
then wished us luck and left.
After class Coach assembled the team
in the Driver's Ed room so that
the cheerleaders could covertly decorate our lockers.
He showed a film of Beaverville's last game, talked strategy,
then led us to the locker room.
The Crazy Stud was certain
that someone had fondled his jockstrap. He
chewed a piece of red crepe
and pretended to spit blood all through practice.

(Stanza break)

That night at the annual bonfire
we stuffed jerseys with dried stalks,
painted pumpkins for helmets,
and heaved the replicas of our enemies, vacant,
onto the burning outhouse.
We watched the pumpkins bake,
smelled their sweet sacrifice as they scorched
and cracked and spilled their orange flesh and seeds,
while we drank cider, chanting
prayers of victory and demise,
sinking into the sweet sleep
of spirit.

Friday the rumor was that
the Crazy Stud and several other players
had performed a sacred new ritual
after the bonfire and had
barbecued and ate a cat.
The day ended with the principal
calling over the intercom
for restraint during, and after the game.

For once the game went just as coach had planned.
The Crazy Stud set a rushing record

while his massive father badgered the refs
from amidst the pep club.
We won easily.

Glenda Camden was crowned
and all the cools left the dance early
for a party at the old rock quarry
which lasted until the Crazy Stud broke the mood
by planting his totem
of scorched cat heads
near the fire.

Later a few of us, still committed to the spirit,
drove to Beeverville High.

We rumbled down the empty highway,
screaming over the stereo, pitching
empty beer bottles into the silent fields,
opening new ones with the safety belts,
then planted a sign
in the Bobcat's lawn
"Capitol High kicks ass!"

Suburban Docudrama

Maple and Oak leaves-fall's fruit, float,
twirling like frightened kamakazis,
and settle on the quiet lawn.
Behind us the newsmen goes on.
We ignore him, knowing he will only
go on.
No children play at dusk
this beautiful, breezy night,
and though the streets are
here and there ecstatic with panic,
there is mostly calm. People we know,
people we will never know, like us,
watching out the front door, resigned,
like children waiting for the bus.
We listen to the siren, squeeze hands,
and, though we have often dreamed
of our love, like the last couple's,
making love in the dust
of the holocaust,
we can't seem to move amidst
Earth's quiet reform.

The Right Thing

Driving home late last night I hit a rabbit.

It was past midnight and foggy

and I was speeding on a backroad blacktop

just outside town.

When I made him I braked hard,

swerved through the other lane,

but he persisted,

his impact with the wheel

as innocent as the drop of mud

or tread.

I drove on, cursing the universe

for its cruelty

and myself for imprudence

and the universe for imprudence,

but soon began to wonder--

what if I hadn't killed him?

What if he were lying in the road, broken, choked with blood,

bobbing his slow head for one gasp.

What a bastard I'd be for leaving him.

What would my wife think?

Or my future children,

knowing I had maimed this creature
and left him to suffer.
I would have to kill him, that would be
the right thing to do.

He lay still in the road,
steaming beneath my hi-beams, seeming
unbroken. There was no blood anyway; only
a raw patch of shoulder.
His eyes were open, empty and unaccusing.
I felt for a heartbeat, listened for a breath,
felt only warm, wet fur,
heard only the rattle of my engine
and the dull pulse of the stereo
through the door.

I'll have to skin it and eat it.
I know how. I've done it before.
That will set things right.

With him on a newspaper in front of the passenger seat,
I drove on, contemplating my task,
remembering where to cut, what to pull, to snap,
when I heard the paper hiss, saw him upright.

I stopped. Years of dust and forgotten sediment, liberated,
collided with the windshield
and he squealed and I squealed
not knowing that he could,
as he vaulted between the bucket seats,
deflecting off my leg.

I opened each door,
tried to frighten him to freedom,
but he was past reason,
clawing from seat to seat, wheezing
and shitting green fear
all over the velour.

I took my flashlight from the glove box, hoping
to freeze and coax him with its beam,
but only increased his pace
and focused his path,
to tight circles in the back seat, squalling,
eyes now milky with rage and terror.

I cold-cocked him with the rolled newspaper,
perhaps too hard, at least
his head seemed too loose

when I laid him, with the newspaper,
in the weeds by the side of the road,
hoping I felt a pulse in his legs
when I let go,
hoping, as I drove on,
that the Scotchguard on the seats worked, thinking;
it was the right thing to do.

Sac River

I am surprised I still know the way,
though not by my lack of grace. Already
I have snagged my jeans, bruised my knees on rock,
wallowing downhill through brush,
encouraged by the pitch of the trail,
and by the swinging weight
of beer and bait.

I am not certain why I have come, perhaps, for mystery,
the mystery Uncle Roy gave
this place: Kid Hole, Buzzard's Bluff, Schoolhouse Rocks,
lore of warriors and hunters.
I have come at night, to stand silly,
like a drunken Diogenes with my lantern, and remember
the mad giggle of coyotes, the apparition of sycamore,
the bloated moan of a bullfrog, moon on the river.

(stanza break)

It's been ten years since Uncle Roy sank
to muddy slumber in the bottom of Preston Hole. God,
he knew this river, every mood, every hole standing naked, at night,
neck high near the deep bank, groping
among the rocks and roots. Feel up under there boy.
Well, pull'm out. Nothins' in there gonna hurt ya, bud.

The river is rising-- a mood from the resevoir
-- marking its truths,
as I settle onto the damp bank.
I cast into the deep swirl of Preston Hole,
feel the humming tug of the unknown,
feel the river, waiting, still.

The Evolution of the Bazaar

Here in the suburbs, where the world is censored
by architecture, we build
the real temples. Clean, clean lines, structural steel and glass
a cubic collage of hunter's green and brass.
We plaster over pain and put plastic to tedium.
And of course we know here that Muzak
is an acquired taste. It is our Diet Music,
the subtle backbeat in our
sweet and low lullaby of boredom with which we weitz
from shop to shop in quest
of anything in particular.

Lullaby. Lullaby. The walkers come only to condition.
Their eyes ahead, fixed from temptation,
they peruse the perimeter like phantoms at a smorgasborg.
Teenagers in shades and phosphorescent garb
cruise then gather at the center in the shopper's park.
Cokes in hand they laugh and dance
and their eyes, like electronic security,
miss nothing, everything.
In the park escalators converge amidst Diet sculptures--
a flag of suspended crystal beads

and velveteen yellow girders that twist
and merge at the skylight like tangled, slurred metaphors
truncated and slumbering in this theme of the unobtrusive.
Here and there old men crouch on cool tile benches.
Squinting into video stores, they watch football,
their faces pensive as though
struggling for something long forgotten.
And everywhere women saunter,
some dressed by credit limit,
some looking for sales,
some looking for sales to ignore.

And outside the roads lead inevitably to other neighborhoods,
but in here, the world curves back upon itself.
And the floor sways to accommodate its load
and there is no
echo.

The Mercenary/Reporter Covers Singles Night at the I.G.A. Supermarket

Grandfather's outdone himself.

Place looks like a goddamned theme park,

brass eagles and salad bars,

live fish, antiques – and a rotating

restaurant – makes you wonder.

Do they know how much hard death pays for this

soft life; so they can serpentine

their carts down aisles, looking for dates,

so the cashiers can wave their electronic wands? Christ.

What's that me'am? I have to check in? Sign my name?

I don't have a permanent address.

I don't want to be on a mailing list.

Just a name tag. Right, yes, like the store.

My grandfather owns the chain.

Right, I'm here to do that piece for *Venture* mag. Thanks, me'am.

Bitch.

Christ, would you look at that. It's just like I figured

a bunch of wormy wimps standing

by the produce – holding cucumbers and smiling slyly.

It's pathetic. I'd like to take them to my jungle,

Watch their roots wither.

It's hard to figure, you know
A week ago I was lean and low,
skirting the Honduran border,
lifting some Honduran skirts
free-lancing for *The Soldier*
with my tape recorder and rifle.
Goddamn it's just like Saigon; better.
Get drunk all day or high, and all the ass
you want for a dollar, or less--
depending on your mood. You can
play one like the bongos, all day
for a quarter and they're grateful, you know,
for you, the liberator.

Christ. There's something else I could've figured.
All the sophisticates gathered by the herbal tea
and exotic coffee. Do they know?
Whose blood paid for that?
My lit prof in college, real pinko, you know,
that's where he'd be--like his hero Prufrock.
Fluffcock's more like it.
He'd be mourning the oppressed lobsters I'm sure;

how they can't skuttle cuffed with those rubber bands.

The guy was lost, like them, you know.

They don't have the picture. None of them, you see.

The blood and cost for this. They don't understand,
they complain about the mechanics.

If they could just see.

One day down there and they'd all

be laid out in their own gravy

like Salisbury Steaks.

My problem is I think too much. That's dangerous, I know.

My pinko prof, he said that was Byron's Manfred's problem too,
knowing there was no punishment for evil, no cost.

It haunted him.

But do you think these people know? No, they
don't have the big picture.

I've killed the poor, that bothers me;

there's no honor in it. They've stolen my honor.

But you've got to drain the sea to find the fish, you see?

God will sort them out. I know. I've been there.

It haunts me too.

Grand River Baptism

The river is alive again,
though the city that killed it, then paved
the road to it, is twenty miles closer.
I used to live here, before the river died,
when the city was forty miles away,
before we even knew the fish were unclean.

It was here on this wide limestone shelf,
beneath the shade of the old Sycamore
that had been there for years sliding
into the river, that I sat fishing one Sunday morning
years ago when, as I crouched in only my cutoffs and sneakers
and rubbed my hands, which were brown and sticky
with Shad guts, against the yellow rocks,
the whole flock of the Grand River Baptist Church,
(who I had heard were hill people, backward)
descended to the water.

The old ones came slow down the steep trail,
the younger ones steadied.
I thought at first they had come for me,
and began to muster a contemptuous reply,
but they stopped just before the bridge.

The men nodded at me or did not look.
The older women, in couch cover plaids,
brocades, brooches, and bunned hair, smiled
The younger ones, in long muslin summer dresses,
were expressionless.

The minister and a young boy, both
in long white baptismal robes, moved
to the front while the congregation bowed. I heard
in whispers and murmurs
what I knew by rhythm was the Lord's prayer.

Then the minister and boy waded into the river,
and a group of young boys moved to the edge. Anxiously,
they watched their friend, then me,
then my line. The boy smiled, apprehensive. The minister nodded.

I could not hear the words, I saw
only the grave gestures
as the head went back and under, as
the line went taut, the pole bent hard.

Today, the congregation is gone,
the river is thin from irrigation, and
here on the trunk of the fallen Sycamore,
in the shade of its progeny, as I
read the city's signs that encourage conscientious decadence
"Please catch and release,"
I am thankful that, that day, when
the line went taut, fins
broke water--heads began to turn,
I cut the line and waited.

I hope you like the poems. Now, whether you would like me to or not, I am going to discuss them a bit; that is, I will try to explain them by accounting for those elusive components that go into their making, namely literary influences, composition practices, etc.

The poems in The Evolution of The Bazaar are arranged roughly in the order in which they were written. The first poem is a year more recent than the two that follow it. But I chose to place it first, not because it is the best poem in the collection, which would have been a sensible reason for putting it there, but because I think it best represents, foreshadows, what's to come later (which is, perhaps, a silly reason to place it first because the reader can't know what I mean until after he is finished the poems). Some of the poems are only a week, or a day, or a month older than the others, so, given that there is little difference between them, I have mixed them up a bit for the sake of the overall pacing of the manuscript. It is only important to note that there is a difference of about three years between when "Gravity Jones" and "When the Bag Burst" were written, and the later poems of the collection. Aside from those first two, the rest have been composed during the last

two years. I mention this because I hope, by the end of this essay, to give the reader a sense, in the Coleridgean fashion, of my "growth" as a poet, and of my poetic perspective, if you will. Now a few embarrassing admissions.

It would be a fair statement to say that I have been a poet, in my own mind at least, since I was eight or nine, when I wrote the first poem I recall. It was for my father, who then managed a Montgomery Ward store, and it was in celebration of the splendor and gaiety of a panty-hose sale he was having-- my first dose of what William Wordsworth called the "spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling," I suppose. It would also, however, be fair to say that I only became a "literate" poet, in the sense that I had any clue as to what I was doing with respect to serious contemporary poetry, three years ago when I took my first creative writing course and began to find out what the contemporary tradition is all about. I had spent three years taking mainly engineering-related courses before deciding that doing so did not really suit my temperament, whereupon I decided to go to law school instead. So I took a few English courses to help prepare myself. I had been writing all along but only very abstract, metaphysical, philosophical poems, most

of which end-rhymed or made use of some other simple word play--poems that echoed cosmic rock lyrics--something akin to John Donne meets The Beatles. It was not until I took that first creative writing course and began to see what kind of poetry was being published in literary journals such as The American Poetry Review and Poetry, that I began to shape my poems to be in tune with what I read in those sources. That is why I've included "Gravity Jones" and "When the Bag Burst"--because they represent my first efforts at tailoring my poems to what I saw as the stylistic demands of contemporary poetry: mostly unrhymed free verse with a penchant for concrete images and extended metaphors.

As I said earlier, I chose to place "Warming Up Your Side" at the beginning, because it echoes many of the themes and employs some of the techniques I often use. I chose it also because it contains hints of the philosophical perspective that runs throughout the poems.

"Warming up your side" is meant to be humorous, but only subtly so. By humor I mean the dramatic irony--irony at the expense of the character who also happens to be the narrator. I think I come naturally by this tendency but I have also profited from studying such works as

Twain's The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn and Robert Frost's poems like "The Witches of Coös" and "Death of the Hired Man." This ironic humor is the same kind that arises in nearly all the first person poems and "Homecoming" as well. What is ironic about the narrator of "Warming Up Your Side" is that despite his attempts to resist succumbing to his indulgent sentimentality, which has been triggered by the absence of his wife, he inevitably does. His wife is gone and it is raining, both of which are survivable circumstances by any measure--but the narrator is a bit of an existential sap who at the mere prompting of these circumstances loses equilibrium and begins to attach and attribute his momentary sadness and loneliness to the whole history of pain, of living in a hostile, decaying universe. By the end of the poem, though he realizes he has slipped into that very "sticky, cryptic poem" a bit, he still manages to avoid lapsing fully into melodrama, in either his emotions or his poem, which is good for him and me alike since neither of our poems would be as effective if he had.

The aesthetic that informs this poem is typical, I think, of many of my poems, especially my persona poems. The narrator winds up, in a sense, making fun of himself for being so sentimental, so romantic, for

having gotten so carried away, in general. This is, no doubt, the inevitable seepage of my own temperament into the personae of the poems, my own "poethics." I am not at all religious. I do, though, think that people ought to do what they can for one another. Philosophically I tend toward skepticism, but I fight it, because I find it too often indulgent and destructive. Perhaps I have had much too good a life thus far to have yet worked up a really nasty pessimism. At any rate these feelings cannot help but find their way into my characters.

So, infused with my temperament, like the narrator of "Warming up your side," the characters in "Annulment," "Fixing Me," "Sac River," and "The Right Thing" find themselves in similar predicaments and experiencing similar thoughts. They all have something to confront in order to reestablish equilibrium. The persona of "Annulment" for instance, is lonely on a grand scale and goes out looking for a mate for himself but on the pretext that he is doing so for his guppy, upon whom he has projected all of his woes, woes not unlike those of the narrator of "Warming Up Your Side." Likewise, the narrator of "Fixing Me," recognizing a need in himself to take the world and his imagination head-on, but also wanting to protect his mate from such needs and their

unpredictable by-products, takes his "boat" out on a lake in the middle of an immense storm. He too finds himself getting carried away, challenging the storm, God, the universe. Having done so, and having exorcised his demons, he returns home a bit embarrassed but also relieved for not having burdened his mate with his silliness.

In "The Right Thing" the narrator again comes upon the evidence of the imprudence of the Universe. This time, though, he himself has been the executor of that imprudence: he has accidentally run over a rabbit.

Again the narrator teeters upon the edge of a hopeless melodramatic oblivion. He wants to do the right thing, to reestablish somehow the equilibrium that was lost when he killed the rabbit. But by the end of the poem he has caught himself getting carried away and come to his senses; his sudden pragmatism arises, of course, when he sees the rabbit "shitting green fear all over the velour" of his car seats.

I have already noted that I learned a good deal about the use of dramatic irony from Mark Twain, among others. Judging from "Fixing Me," "Sac River," and "The Right Thing," one might also surmise (and I readily admit) that I have learned something from him as well about hyperbole and the fabrication of myth. My humor, when I use it, is similar to

Twain's, I think, in that it is rooted in a good deal of philosophical skepticism, (though mine is not nearly so fatalistic as Twain's) but also in an appreciation for life, both its sorrows and joys.

My temperament comes from a variety of sources, of course, but I think some of it comes from simply growing up in America, learning to love it and also to hate it, loving it for the opportunities it offers and hating it for the immense cost of those opportunities to other Americans and to the rest of the world. Several of the poems in the collection reflect this conflict. They catalogue some of my insights, however small they may be, into America. The poems I am talking about are "Homecoming," "The Evolution of the Bazaar," "Suburban Docudrama," "The Mercenary/Reporter Covers Singles Night at the I.G.A. Supermarket," and "Grand River Baptism." Oddly enough only one poem of this group, "Homecoming," is very humorous, but it is satirical humor, that is, humor with a definite rhetorical perspective. The rest of the poems in this group also have a more visible rhetorical perspective, which is what distinguishes them from the group earlier discussed. These poems have targets.

It is generally a struggle for me when I begin to write a poem like

"The Evolution of the Bazaar," one that has injected in it a good deal of social criticism. It is a struggle for two reasons. The first is that I feel a bit uncomfortable when, in a poem, I am depending primarily upon what is being said, and situation, to move the reader rather than upon how I am saying it. Because I like so much to play with the language, when I begin to subordinate the sound and construction of the lines, and even images, to rhetorical demands I am troubled a bit. Nevertheless, this kind of subordination has been a popular convention in recent poetry and I have paid obeisance to it, though ideally I always try to make the language as interesting, rhythmically and structurally, as I can, which is a point I will come back to later on.

The second reason it is a struggle for me when I begin writing a rhetorically charged poem is that I feel a bit as though I am betraying myself, because I normally hold that a poem, like any work of art, should above all be aesthetically pleasing; that is, it should "delight." The other half of the ancient equation, the "instruct" half, I worry about because I do not feel especially qualified to do any "instructing." Thus, when I begin to include some sort of implicit rhetorical strategy into a poem, I, being skeptical (as I earlier noted) even of myself, begin to

suspect my motives, wonder if I am writing propaganda, which, of course, I am.

This has always been, and continues to be, a very important issue for me. My roommate during my first year of graduate school was a practical-minded pre-med student. He and I would often have discussions about the value of literature. He would generally say something to the effect of, " If a writer has some important thing to say like ' the government is corrupt' or 'such and such is being oppressed' why doesn't he just make a speech on television or preach a sermon in the streets?Why waste his time and energy with a novel or poem?" With his questions he was simply having a bit of fun being argumentative. Nevertheless, he had very shrewdly put his finger on the most difficult issue of writing, at least for me.

My very Coleridgian answers to him were never very satisfactory, but satisfactory answers in this arena are hard to come by. I would tell him that, in my view, the writer's first responsibility is aesthetic, to create a valuable and moving piece of art. I would also tell him that most writers are embarassingly opinionated (very few can resist embedding their opinions, their " vision," into their work), but that the really good

writers were the ones whose work you could admire despite how pleasing, ridiculous, or disgusting you found their respective "vision." This is a point that is made most effectively and eloquently by Jonathan Holden, in his essay "Poetry and Commitment,"¹ especially in a passage in where he compares the respective failure and success of Ginsberg's "Capitol Airlines" and Stevens' "The News and the Weather", showing that Stevens' poem is far superior to Ginsberg's in spite of its offensive content.

After telling my roommate that one could admire a writer's work despite his "vision," my end of the discussion would generally become a bit foggy as I would try to explain that what one was admiring in such cases was not necessarily just the aesthetic component of the writer's work, but something deeper, some "truth" that was being expressed even though that truth very probably was not the one the writer thought he was expressing. I, of course, had to venture into this tough territory because I was trying to anticipate my roommate's counter point that if the pleasure of literature is simply aesthetic then there is no point to "serious literature."

My viewpoint has changed very little since I had those discussions

with my roommate. I still believe that a poem ought to first "delight" its reader/listener. Instruction is optional. But if a poet chooses to "instruct," to make a statement, then s/he ought to work especially hard to make sure that his or her poem is not limited to only that statement; that is, s/he should make sure that the language, the images, the very unfolding of the poem itself (what Holden refers to as "discovery" in the aforementioned essay), are not sacrificed to the persuasive elements of the poem. If the poem is no more than the assertion of the poet's vision, then it would indeed be more appropriately reduced to its "statement" and worked-up into a frothy sermon.

Yeats, one of my favorite poets, is a good example of a poet whose poetry is still beautiful and moving even though it has the poet's "vision" firmly and visibly embedded in every line. One does not have to have an understanding of Yeats's cosmological universe, his complicated theory of history or his politics in order to be enchanted by his poems. One can simply enjoy the beauty of the language--its sound and construction--and can be allured by the images and metaphors (though, no doubt, one is not allured in the exact way Yeats intended).

I do not want to belabor this point. I want only to emphasize that

these are the issues that I struggle with when writing and that this "struggle" is really an integral part of my composition process. I consciously work toward giving the reader something to enjoy, something to keep, even if s/he does not like what is being said. I do not want to be didactic, to force the reader to pin him or herself down, nor do I wish to imply that I am any less guilty of anything than s/he is. We are all trying to understand the world and ourselves. Poetry, literature, is part (and not an infallible part) of that process of understanding. This, I think, may be why dramatic irony comes so easily to me, because with it I can afford the reader the opportunity to expose him or herself to the ideas and linguistic world of the poem without having to commit him or herself to being either for or against that world.

I had all of these notions in mind, of course, when I was writing "The Evolution of the Bazaar." The poem began as mainly a descriptive poem about malls. I had been spending a lot of time in malls, because I was about to get married and had to do a lot of tuxedo-fitting and the like. I was struck by how eerily, purposefully tranquil malls were, and I started to work up a poem about them. But as I began to work on the poem, my imagination and my temperament took over. I began to wonder

what could be so disturbing about shopping to demand such a soothing environment. I imagined that perhaps most, though not all, people who come to malls do so not to shop for something they really need but for something they want. They have more money than they really need, a situation which automatically creates wants and is, in America, perfectly normal, I suppose. I also imagined that mall inhabitants might have some vague conflict brewing out of the Christian ethic that permeates our culture-- standard middle-class guilt. So, I envisioned, the purpose of the soothing environment was to appease those feelings of unease, to create a self-contained and self-reinforcing world in which nothing is disturbing, ("obtrusive") in which most people have money (or they wouldn't be there) and in which, even if you are guilty of something, so are the rest of the people there. You are not alone. The same observations could be made about American middle and upper-class life in general. Suburban villages, which, incidentally, are where most good malls are located, are designed according to the same architectural aesthetics as malls. This observation, though I am oversimplifying a bit, is, in the end, much of what the poem is getting at--that the design of the suburban world arises out of the continuing American desire to

reconcile the demands of capitalism with those of christianity.

When I finished the poem I decided it might be a bit too didactic in its approach, so I reworked those places where I thought I was beating the reader in the face. The most notable changes are these: in the first stanza the line that now reads "the subtle backbeat in our / sweet and low lullaby of boredom" initially read " the backbeat in our symphony of consumption." Because I thought this first one was a bit strong on rhetoric and a bit weak on sound and image, I made the change. The revised line is improved, I think, because its sound is much more fluid and because "sweet and low" picks up and plays off of the "Diet Music" reference a few lines earlier and the "Diet sculpture" one to come later. The second change was in the second stanza. The line that now reads " their faces pensive as though/ struggling for something long forgotten" was at first followed by "perhaps remembering fortunes squandered," but I excised it because I thought it was too strong, tonally.

The kinds of changes in "The Evolution of the Bazaar" that I have described above are very typical of the latter stages in my composition regardless of what kind of poem I am writing. The early stages of that process, however, take two forms.

The first form is this: I do not have an "idea," but feel as though I ought to be writing something, even if just for the sake of practice; so I begin to scribble a bit and to hash around in my mind until I come up with an idea, or at least a line. This usually amounts to remembering an idea or line that I have thought of and forgotten some time before. Sometimes, though, it is simply a process of random association. Once I come up with a "beginning" I pursue it as far as I feel inclined. This tactic sometimes results in a draft of a whole poem but usually only produces a fragment that I may or may not come back to later. A lot of poets seem to work this way-- at least so do many of the poets who are included in Alberta Turner's book Fifty Contemporary Poets.² in which each of the fifty poets describes his composition process with respect to a particular poem. Personally, this is my least favorite way to write. Perhaps I just have not yet developed a knack for it, but I am very seldom satisfied with what I produce this way.

In fact, the only poems in this brief collection that I wrote this way are "Gravity Jones," "When the Bag Burst," and "Suburban Docudrama." The first two, of course, were written very early when I had not yet developed a strategy I really liked. "Suburban Docudrama," though, is an

example of one of those few experiments, of the many tried, that turned out reasonably well. The poem came about this way.

It was a fall evening. My wife was studying and I was not. I was bored and pestering her a bit so, she told me to go write something, which I did. I tried to write a simple descriptive poem about fall-- one that did not have my "vision" stamped so plainly upon it(evidence of that "struggle" I discussed earlier). I quickly discovered, however, how futile these attempts to squelch that "vision" are for me. I began with the line "Oak leaves float," which is, admittedly, not a very flashy line. Precisely because that line seemed a bit dull to me I began to ponder it, and my subversive sensibilities soon took command; that is, I decided it might be fun, at least for me, to begin with something very tranquil and normal like that, then gradually build toward something really creepy. That is what I did. A poem that began as an aesthetic description of fall became a hypothetical, and not entirely serious, postulation of what might happen on an average fall evening in an average suburban neighborhood if a nuclear war began. I imagined that a few people would panic but most would probably be paralyzed, either by fear or by the sudden and disturbing realization that what was happening seemed perfectly logical.

I also imagined that the whole atmosphere of the event might take on the quality of a prime-time docudrama or a miniseries. Of course I could not resist throwing in a few other little twists and turns along the way. The best description I can think of for the method of composition I used to write "Suburban Docudram" and have been discussing here is that of fishing with worms, which is to say one can generally catch *something*

My second and preferred strategy of composition is that I have an "idea," generally a vague one, to begin with, but do not write anything down immediately. Rather, I let it steep for a while-- days, weeks, sometimes a month or two until, for no reason I can really explain, I will begin to write the poem, whereupon all the particles that have been accumulating in my mind, and a few new ones as well, will settle onto the page. The best analogy I can think of here is that the process is somewhat like that of sticking an electrode into an ionic solution.

Once I begin writing, I try to write down everything I can think of, to rough out the poem in crude form. I know mostly what I want to say but in only a few places how I want to say it. At this point the product is sometimes vastly different than the idea conceived long before, but I do not worry about that.

After I have the poem roughed-out, sometimes directly after, sometimes days, weeks, or months after, I revise. In essence, I try to see where the poem wants to take itself, determine if I want it to go there and, if I do, make sure it does. I work on the pacing and the structure of the poem and, most of all, the language-- diction, syntax, sounds, images, etc. I try to make the images and sounds resonate with one another in a way that clarifies and deepens the meaning I am after. Other than the meaning I want, nothing is absolute at this point, and this process continues until I am basically satisfied with the poem, or until I give up, for the time being. Some examples will be helpful, I think.

"The Evolution of the Bazaar," whose composition I have already related, was written in this manner, as were all of the poems assembled here except for the three discussed earlier. Naturally, the composition time varied with each. "The Right Thing" and "Grand River Baptism" took only a few hours. "Homecoming" and "Fixing Me" took a month or so. The rest fall in between. But for all the method was the same.

Only the composition of "Fixing Me" deviated at all, and that deviation was small. In the first drafts of it I used a formula to generate the material I wanted; that is, nearly all the lines, other than those that

begin "I want to tell you," began with "how"-- "how a bass rolled by my boat," for instance, or "how when a lady stepped from beneath the shelter." As I revised the poem I cut nearly all the "how's" out. For some reason, though, that formula was very helpful during the early stages of composition.

Most of the changes I make in revision are like those I described with respect to "The Evolution of the Bazaar." In addition to those the only other notable examples I can recall are these: In "Homecoming," the lines that now read "chanting/ prayers of victory and demise/ sinking into the sweet sleep/ of spirit" initially read "chanting prayers of victory and spirit." Also, in "The Right Thing," the line that now says "shitting green fear all over the velour" first read, simply, "shitting on the seats." As one can see, the original lines serve only as notes to myself, telling me what I want in a spot until I decide how to put it there.

Of all the poems in the collection "The Mercenary/ Reporter Covers Singles Night at the I.G.A. Supermarket" was the most difficult to write, because I was creating, for the first time, a narrative persona who did not have very poetic sensibilities. I did not know exactly how to put the

"poetry" into the poem, if you will. This character was not one to turn a pretty phrase like most of my other personae. This is where Frost's "Death of a Hired Man" and "The Witches of Coös" helped. After reading and studying those two poems I decided that the success of the poem was going to depend on how well I could create the character and the surroundings off of which he was going to bounce himself, his thoughts, and his life. Once again I resorted to dramatic irony, though this time my character was not one to make fun of himself. I wanted, simply, for the reader/listener to know more about him than he himself did. I wanted a character who one could both pity and despise, one who was, as Orwell put it "defending the indefensible" and knew it at one level, but denied it at another, the resulting conflict of which was emotionally devastating for him, as it is for most of us in America. I am not sure I have yet achieved all of this in the poem, but I am working at it.

"The Mercenary /Reporter Covers Singles Night at the I.G.A. Supermarket" and "Grand River Baptism" are the two most recent poems in this collection. I do not consider them finished. Perhaps I have not yet grown enough used to them to call them "finished," but that is not important. What is important is that they represent some growth from

the earlier poems in the collection, some proof that I am experimenting and pushing myself to improve, which I hope the poems, and this essay, demonstrate.

End Notes

- 1) Holden, Jonathan. Style and Authenticity in Postmodern Poetry (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1986) 81.
- 2) Turner, Alberta T., ed. Fifty Contemporary Poets: The Creative Process (New York: McKay, 1977)

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THE EVOLUTION OF THE BAZAAR

by

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The first half of this book is comprised of twelve of my poems. The second half consists of a critical afterword (apparatus) that seeks to explain the poems in terms of their strategies, issues, influences, and methods of composition. I first describe how I began as a doodling, abstract poet and engineering student, but eventually decided to make writing my career. Next I discuss how I tend to use dramatic irony as a device, especially in my personae poems, and how this tendency arises from my Twain influence as well as from my natural temperament. I describe how I struggle, when writing a strongly rhetorical (persuasive) poem, with the issue of how much to "delight" the reader and how much to "instruct." I cite my view as essentially Coleridgian; that is, I assert that a poem ought to first be aesthetically pleasing, then, "instructional," if it can manage to do so without sacrificing the poem's beauty. Next I describe my composition process-- how it takes two forms: The first is when I have no "idea," but force one. The second, and preferred form, is when I have an "idea," think about it for a long while, write a draft, and gradually revise it. I give examples of poems composed by each method. Finally I recount a problem I had in composing one particular

poem and how I solved that problem by seeing how Robert Frost handled the same problem in two of his poems.